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The World of Prostitution in Late Imperial Austria, by Nancy M. Wingfield, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 272 pp. £60.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780198801658

Nancy M. Wingfield's new book, *The World of Prostitution in Late Imperial Austria*, opens with an extraordinary anecdote that describes retired Croatian railway guard Thomas Koprivec's efforts in 1912 to enlist police forces in the rescue of his twenty-one-year-old daughter Olga from a brothel in the capital city Agram. Koprivec was concerned that Olga had been trafficked and was held against her wishes. The police interviewed and photographed Olga, only to find out that she had no intention of returning to her rural home town of Gottschee. Wingfield uses Olga's archival record to stake her critical approach to prostitution in the late Habsburg Empire (1880-1918). She aims to dismantle female prostitution as a discursive construct and restore the historical experience of its divergent stake holders. Understanding 'the wider world of prostitution in late imperial Austria', Wingfield writes, 'expands our knowledge of the sex trade across the multi-ethnic empire ... [and] reveals the contradictions in contemporary attitudes toward female sexuality' (p. 10). Her multilateral investigation of the imperial Austria's 'sexual economy' (p. 7) sheds new light on a range of concomitant topics: class, gender, public health and sexuality, religion, xenophobia, and white slavery or *Mädchenhandel*.

Wingfield paints a complex picture of the institutional parameters and individual experiences of early twentieth-century prostitution in Vienna and beyond. During this time, prostitution remained illegal. A sex worker's status could change from 'clandestine' to 'tolerated' or 'registered' (Wingfield uses the terms interchangeably) if she agreed to register with local police, supplied information on her background via a questionnaire, and subjected herself to regular medical exams (including mandatory treatment for venereal diseases). Not surprisingly, Wingfield found that women moved in and out of these two categories as their circumstances, primarily economic and medical, changed. Tolerated prostitutes turned

clandestine, for example, if they feared that they had contracted a STD (p. 13). Wingfield rightly observes that the period (1880-1918) was plagued by two ‘moral panics’ around prostitution, namely, trafficking/sexual coercion and venereal disease. Tolerated prostitutes worked primarily out of brothels where the state apparatus could keep a close watch and where, in theory, they were afforded certain amenities and protections. But as the sensational Riehl trial of 1906 reveals, the historical realities were more complex. The Jewish madam Regine Riehl operated a brothel in Vienna and was accused of ‘gross maltreatment of the tolerated prostitutes in her employ’ (p.17). Wingfield dedicates her first chapter to the trial and its extensive archival records ranging from court transcript to popular press accounts since this allows the author to calibrate her argument and put in place the book’s structure.

Wingfield’s authoritative study places prostitution at the nexus of key debates that marked the Habsburg Empire’s protracted emergence as a modern nation state. Wingfield’s exploration of the fluid movement of people, discourses and regulations between centres and peripheries represents a prodigious scholarly undertaking. Her dexterous handling of unwieldy archives bears witness to the ways in which members of one of Habsburg society’s most contested sectors might have experienced this period of socio-political upheaval. Wingfield tries to uncover the motley motivations and experiences of the very actors – from traffickers, panderers, pimps and brothel owners to prostitutes and clients - who propelled prostitution in the first place, but whose voices have long been silenced. This is an ambitious proposition and demands a reading of the archives against the grain. In addition, imperial Austria was a multi-ethnic cluster of political systems and languages (Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Galicia, Lodomeria, Dalmatia and Bukovina to name a few) and access to relevant archives is taxing. Wingfield notes that ‘this book had a very long – elephantine, even – gestation’ (p. v), but her patience and tenacity paid off as *The World of Prostitution* draws many fascinating, and at times, unexpected conclusions.

Although Wingfield's monograph focusses on late imperial Austria, her approach opens up exciting new possibilities for scholars working across geo-political contexts and time periods. Wingfield's historical actors moved in and out of prostitution as their socio-economic circumstance changed. This destabilised state-imposed categories of clandestine and tolerated prostitution. Wingfield argues that prostitution created economic opportunities for predominantly working-class women with limited education and no access to legal equality. Wingfield's insistence on prostitution as a 'viable choice' (p. 3) might well acerbate readers who view prostitution as a deeply gendered consequence of socio-economic and educational disenfranchisement. Did women who lived in the impoverished rural outposts of the Habsburg Empire, for example, fully understand what they were getting into when 'voluntarily' following their traffickers? Wingfield's book raises complex questions that continue to divide present-day debates over appropriate legal frameworks for prostitution. The passing of Vienna's new prostitution-law in 2011 reminded us that there is little middle ground between advocates of prostitution's abolition and supporters of decriminalisation. The current political climate not only in Austria, but across Europe, makes Wingfield's historical study of prostitution 'from below' all the more important because it provides a crucial historical context for the classed, medicalised and racialised discourses that continue to drive present-day debates on the regulation of prostitution. But maybe most importantly, Wingfield's commitment to excavating historical sex workers' physical traces across divergent institutional contexts and discursive practices serves as a reminder that prostitution is not a category but a lived experience in the first instance.

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